

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS
DALLAS DIVISION

GLENN CASEY PORTWOOD, §
BOP Register No. 64653-379, §
§
Plaintiff, §
§
V. § No. 3:20-cv-3344-X-BN
§
§
SCHNEIDER & MCKINNEY P.C. and §
W. TROY MCKINNEY, §
§
§
Defendants. §

**FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATION OF THE
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE**

Plaintiff Glenn Casey Portwood, a federal prisoner, has filed this *pro se* civil action explicitly alleging legal malpractice, malfeasance, misfeasance, and misrepresentation against his former defense counsel in state criminal proceedings, in which Portwood was charged with aggravated sexual assault of a child and possession of child pornography. See Dkt. No. 3. The Court has referred this case to the undersigned United States magistrate judge for pretrial management under 28 U.S.C. § 636(b) and a standing order of reference from United States District Judge Brantley Starr. And the undersigned enters these findings of fact, conclusions of law, and recommendation that the Court should dismiss this construed civil rights action without prejudice to the extent explained below.

Legal Standards

Under the Prison Litigation Reform Act (“PLRA”), where a prisoner – whether he is incarcerated or detained pending trial – seeks relief from a governmental entity

or employee, a district court must, on initial screening, identify cognizable claims or dismiss the complaint, or any portion of the complaint, that “is frivolous, malicious, or fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted.” 28 U.S.C. § 1915A(b)(1).

The fails-to-state-a-claim language of this statute (as well as its sister statute, Section 1915(e)(2)(B)) “tracks the language of Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6).” *Black v. Warren*, 134 F.3d 732, 733-34 (5th Cir. 1998) (per curiam).

And “[i]t is well-established that a district court may dismiss a complaint on its own motion under [Rule] 12(b)(6) for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted.” *Starrett v. U.S. Dep’t of Defense*, No. 3:18-cv-2851-M-BH, 2018 WL 6069969, at *1 (N.D. Tex. Oct. 30, 2018) (citing *Carroll v. Fort James Corp.*, 470 F.3d 1171 (5th Cir. 2006) (citing, in turn, *Shawnee Int’l, N.V. v. Hondo Drilling Co.*, 742 F.2d 234, 236 (5th Cir. 1984))), *rec. accepted*, 2018 WL 6068991 (N.D. Tex. Nov. 20, 2018), *aff’d*, 763 F. App’x 383 (5th Cir.) (per curiam), *cert. denied*, 140 S. Ct. 142 (2019).

A district court may exercise its “inherent authority … to dismiss a complaint on its own motion … ‘as long as the procedure employed is fair.’” *Gaffney v. State Farm Fire & Cas. Co.*, 294 F. App’x 975, 977 (5th Cir. 2008) (per curiam) (quoting *Carroll*, 470 F.3d at 1177 (quoting, in turn, *Bazrowx v. Scott*, 136 F.3d 1053, 1054 (5th Cir. 1998)); citation omitted). The United States Court of Appeals for Fifth Circuit has “suggested that fairness in this context requires both notice of the court’s intention to dismiss *sua sponte* and an opportunity to respond.” *Id.* (quoting *Lozano v. Ocwen Fed. Bank, FSB*, 489 F.3d 636, 643 (5th Cir. 2007) (quoting, in turn, *Carroll*, 470 F.3d at 1177); internal quotation marks and brackets omitted). These findings,

conclusions, and recommendations provides notice, and the period for filing objections to them affords an opportunity to respond. *See, e.g., Starrett*, 2018 WL 6069969, at *2 (citations omitted)).

Dismissal for failure to state a claim under either Section 1915A(b)(1), Section 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii), or Rule 12(b)(6) “turns on the sufficiency of the ‘*factual* allegations’ in the complaint,” *Smith v. Bank of Am., N.A.*, 615 F. App’x 830, 833 (5th Cir. 2015) (per curiam) (quoting *Johnson v. City of Shelby, Miss.*, 574 U.S. 10, 12 (2014) (per curiam)), as neither the PLRA, the IFP statute, nor the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure “countenance dismissal of a complaint for imperfect statement of the legal theory supporting the claim asserted,” *Johnson*, 574 U.S. at 11.

Instead, plaintiffs need only “plead facts sufficient to show” that the claims asserted have “substantive plausibility” by stating “simply, concisely, and directly events” that they contend entitle them to relief. *Id.* at 12 (citing FED. R. CIV. P. 8(a)(2)-(3), (d)(1), (e)).

“A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.” *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009). “The plausibility standard is not akin to a ‘probability requirement,’ but it asks for more than a sheer possibility that a defendant has acted unlawfully.” *Id.* And “[a] claim for relief is implausible on its face when ‘the well-pleaded facts do not permit the court to infer more than the mere possibility of misconduct.’” *Harold H. Huggins Realty, Inc. v. FNC, Inc.*, 634 F.3d 787, 796 (5th Cir. 2011) (quoting *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679); *see also*

Inclusive Communities Project, Inc. v. Lincoln Prop. Co., 920 F.3d 890, 899 (5th Cir. 2019) (“Determining whether a complaint states a plausible claim for relief is ‘a context-specific task that requires the reviewing court to draw on its judicial experience and common sense.’” (quoting *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679; citing *Robbins v. Oklahoma*, 519 F.3d 1242, 1248 (10th Cir. 2008) (“[T]he degree of specificity necessary to establish plausibility and fair notice, and therefore the need to include sufficient factual allegations, depends on context.”))).

While, under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 8(a)(2), a complaint need not contain detailed factual allegations, a plaintiff must allege more than labels and conclusions, and, while a court must accept all of a plaintiff’s allegations as true, it is “not bound to accept as true a legal conclusion couched as a factual allegation.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678 (quoting *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007)). A threadbare or formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, will not suffice. *See id.*

This rationale has even more force here, as the Court “must construe the pleadings of *pro se* litigants liberally,” *Andrade v. Gonzales*, 459 F.3d 538, 543 (5th Cir. 2006), “to prevent the loss of rights due to inartful expression,” *Marshall v. Eadison*, 704CV123HL, 2005 WL 3132352, at *2 (M.D. Ga. Nov. 22, 2005) (citing *Hughes v. Rowe*, 449 U.S. 5, 9 (1980)). But “liberal construction does not require that the Court ... create causes of action where there are none.” *Smith v. CVS Caremark Corp.*, No. 3:12-cv-2465-B, 2013 WL 2291886, at *8 (N.D. Tex. May 23, 2013). “To demand otherwise would require the ‘courts to explore exhaustively all potential

claims of a *pro se* plaintiff” and would “transform the district court from its legitimate advisory role to the improper role of an advocate seeking out the strongest arguments and most successful strategies for a party.” *Jones v. Mangrum*, No. 3:16-cv-3137, 2017 WL 712755, at *1 (M.D. Tenn. Feb. 23, 2017) (quoting *Beaudett v. City of Hampton*, 775 F.2d 1274, 1278 (4th Cir. 1985)).

“Ordinarily, ‘a *pro se* litigant should be offered an opportunity to amend his complaint before it is dismissed.’” *Wiggins v. La. State Univ. – Health Care Servs. Div.*, 710 F. App’x 625, 627 (5th Cir. 2017) (per curiam) (quoting *Brewster v. Dretke*, 587 F.3d 764, 767-68 (5th Cir. 2009)). But leave to amend is not required where an amendment would be futile, *i.e.*, “an amended complaint would still ‘fail to survive a Rule 12(b)(6) motion,’ *Stem v. Gomez*, 813 F.3d 205, 215-16 (5th Cir. 2016) (quoting *Marucci Sports, L.L.C. v. Nat'l Collegiate Athletic Ass'n*, 751 F.3d 368, 378 (5th Cir. 2014)), or where a plaintiff has already amended his claims, *see Nixon v. Abbott*, 589 F. App’x 279, 279 (5th Cir. 2015) (per curiam) (“Contrary to Nixon’s argument, he was given the opportunity to amend his complaint in his responses to the magistrate judge’s questionnaire, which has been recognized as an acceptable method for a *pro se* litigant to develop the factual basis for his complaint.” (citation omitted)).

Analysis

The Court should first question whether there is subject matter jurisdiction over this action, as a fair interpretation of Portwood’s complaint is that he (1) appears to allege only violations of state law against his former defense counsel and (2) does not establish that there is complete diversity of citizenship, as Portwood’s complaint

raises a plausible inference that all parties are Texas citizens.

But Portwood does reference a violation of constitutional rights and has cited 42 U.S.C. § 1983 in his complaint, the factual allegations of which could be liberally construed to raise a Sixth Amendment claim.

Even so, a prisoner generally may not state a constitutional claim against his former defense counsel. Defense attorneys, whether public defenders or private attorneys, are not “state actors” and cannot be sued under Section 1983. *See Polk Cnty. v. Dodson*, 454 U.S. 312, 324-25 (1981) (“[A] public defender does not act under color of state law when performing a lawyer’s traditional functions as counsel to a defendant in a criminal proceeding”); *Mills v. Criminal Dist. Court No. 3*, 837 F.2d 677, 679 (5th Cir. 1988) (“[P]rivate attorneys, even court-appointed attorneys, are not official state actors, and generally are not subject to suit under section 1983.”); *cf. Sellers v. Haney*, 639 F. App’x 276, 277 (5th Cir. 2016) (per curiam) (“The district court properly concluded that Sellers’s defense attorneys were not state actors.” (citing *Dodson*, 454 U.S. at 317-18)).

And Portwood has alleged no plausible facts to show that any former defense counsel conspired with state actors to deprive Portwood of constitutional rights. *See Mills*, 837 F.2d at 679.

Further – and only to the extent that he may be able to show some state action – Portwood has not shown that the state criminal judgments referenced in the complaint, which are inextricably intertwined with the claims against his former defense counsel in this lawsuit, have been reversed on direct appeal, expunged by

executive order, or otherwise declared invalid by a state tribunal or federal court. For example, he references Cause No. 12-DCR-061693 in his complaint. *See Dkt. No. 3 at 5.* That conviction, for aggravated sexual assault of a child under fourteen, was affirmed on direct appeal earlier this year. *See Portwood v. State*, No. 14-19-00377-CR, 2020 WL 6072721 (Tex. App. – Houston [14th Dist.] Oct. 15, 2020), *aff’g State v. Portwood*, No. 12-DCR-061693 (434th Jud. Dist. Ct., Fort Bend Cnty., Tex.).

So, even if there is alleged state action, a Sixth Amendment claim of ineffective assistance of counsel based on “factual allegations [that] are necessarily inconsistent with the validity of [a] conviction” that a plaintiff fails to show has been reversed on direct appeal, expunged by executive order, or otherwise declared invalid by a state tribunal or federal court should be dismissed as frivolous. *McCann v. Neilsen*, 466 F.3d 619, 621 (7th Cir. 2006) (cited in *Bush v. Strain*, 513 F.3d 492, 498 n.14 (5th Cir. 2008)); *see Heck v. Humphrey*, 512 U.S. 477, 486-87 (1994); *Hamilton v. Lyons*, 74 F.3d 99, 102 (5th Cir. 1996) (“A § 1983 claim which falls under the rule in *Heck* is legally frivolous unless the conviction or sentence at issue has been reversed, expunged, invalidated, or otherwise called into question.” (citation omitted)).

In fact, because Portwood fails to show that a criminal “conviction has yet to be formally terminated in his favor, his [related civil] causes of action … have not yet accrued and will not begin to accrue until” a conviction is vacated, reversed, expunged, declared invalid, or called into question by issuance of a writ of habeas corpus or otherwise. *Cook v. City of Tyler, Tex.*, 974 F.3d 537, 538-39 (5th Cir. 2020) (per curiam) (citing *Heck*, 512 U.S. at 489-90; footnote omitted); *see, e.g.*, *Mount v.*

Wakefield, 738 F. App'x 280, 280-81 (5th Cir. 2018) (per curiam) (affirming dismissal of Section 1983 claim based on alleged violation of the Sixth Amendment right to effective assistance of counsel as barred by *Heck*). But a *Heck* “dismissal ‘do[es] not preclude a later claim meeting the preconditions for suit.’ That is, a *Heck* dismissal is a dismissal without prejudice.” *Id.* at 539 (quoting *Johnson v. McElveen*, 101 F.3d 423, 424 (5th Cir. 1996); citing *Clarke v. Stalder*, 154 F.3d 186, 191 (5th Cir. 1998) (en banc)).

Recommendation

The Court should dismiss this action without prejudice to Plaintiff Glenn Casey Portwood’s ability to refile his claims in a court with subject matter jurisdiction or, to the extent that he has alleged a constitutional violation, once he can show state action and the that the preconditions of *Heck v. Humphrey*, 512 U.S. 477 (1994), have been met.

A copy of these findings, conclusions, and recommendation shall be served on all parties in the manner provided by law. Any party who objects to any part of these findings, conclusions, and recommendation must file specific written objections within 14 days after being served with a copy. See 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); FED. R. CIV. P. 72(b). In order to be specific, an objection must identify the specific finding or recommendation to which objection is made, state the basis for the objection, and specify the place in the magistrate judge’s findings, conclusions, and recommendation where the disputed determination is found. An objection that merely incorporates by reference or refers to the briefing before the magistrate judge is not specific. Failure

to file specific written objections will bar the aggrieved party from appealing the factual findings and legal conclusions of the magistrate judge that are accepted or adopted by the district court, except upon grounds of plain error. *See Douglass v. United Servs. Auto. Ass'n*, 79 F.3d 1415, 1417 (5th Cir. 1996).

DATED: November 13, 2020



DAVID L. HORAN
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE